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Turmoil in the Flemish road haulage sector

At the beginning of June 1999, lorry drivers brought the Flemish road haulage sector to a halt by means of road blocks in support of their demands in the current bargaining round. The sector is under heavy pressure from European integration, growing world markets, increased competition, rising customer expectations and government regulation. These mounting pressures lay behind the drivers' protest actions.

In June 1999 the Belgian press and television carried pictures of Flemish lorry drivers blocking highways, verges and access roads to important seaports. The protests resembled those of strikers in France during 1997 ([FR9711177F](#)). As in the French case, the issues underlying the Belgian protests are complex. The gulf between lorry drivers and employers in the sector is very deep. Although the current dispute appears to be rather trivial, much more is actually at stake: trade unions are demanding a wage increase of BEF 10 an hour, but the employers are offering only BEF 8 an hour. A difference of BEF 2 can in itself hardly explain the tough stance adopted by the trade unions and the blockades. Indeed, a great deal more lies behind the dispute.

Road haulage employs 45,000 people in Belgium, which includes about 15,000 employees in the larger distribution centres. At the beginning of June 1999, negotiations opened for a new collective agreement. However, they almost immediately broke down. As well as a wage increase of BEF 10 an hour, the unions were demanding an additional length-of-service bonus of between BEF 10,000 and BEF 50,000 a year, which would have meant an increase of BEF 20 an hour for a lorry driver with 25 years' experience (current gross wages are BEF 322 an hour). The unions also requested the abolition of the existing working time schedules. Lorry drivers now officially have a 39-hour working week, but a complicated system of so-called "transition times" which are remunerated at 84% of the basic wage opens the door for almost unlimited overtime work. The unions are therefore asking for a maximum 48-hour working week and the abolition of the system of transition times.

Employers reacted by offering an hourly wage increase of BEF 2, an extra BEF 4 for drivers and two hourly length-of-service bonuses worth BEF 1 each. They were outspoken in their opposition to the abolition of the transition times system.

Professional skills and competence

Union representatives are justifying their demands by stating that lorry drivers possess high levels of professional skill and competence. Lorry drivers must not only be capable drivers, but they must also be able to load and unload, repair technical problems, have certain language skills, carry out basic administration and act as "ambassadors" for their company in other countries. In addition, they have a major responsibility once in traffic. If responsible driving is expected, then the unions claim that no one should expect drivers to drive for 70 hours a week without becoming "time bombs at the wheel". If society wants motivated and highly skilled lorry drivers, the unions claim, the minimum wage needs to be increased: currently a lorry driver earns the same basic wage as a cleaner.

The employers base their refusal to accept the demands on increasing international competition and on high Belgian employment costs. Although about three-quarters of the sector is currently in the hands of domestic companies, this will change due to changes in European rules and regulations. Domestic transport will become more open to competition from international haulage companies.

Work pressure from increased competition

The wage demands actually obscure underlying issues in the road haulage sector, including work pressures and increased competition: competition is intense, profit margins very slim and work pressures high as a result of "just-in-time" management (itself in contradiction with the increasing problem of congestion on the Belgian road system which causes standstills). These problems trouble both employers and employees. In order to survive in an increasingly competitive environment, a dynamic road haulage company has to work more efficiently, provide higher quality services, perform additional tasks and - in brief - offer features that go well beyond the simple transportation of goods. This is widening the nature of the tasks required from the lorry drivers: tasks traditionally performed by warehouse or stock managers are now taken over by the drivers themselves.

A further element that is changing the content and workload of drivers is the introduction of a

number of computer applications such as planning systems and mobile means of communication. A number of a lorry's operations may be permanently monitored and controlled by means of an on-board computer. These include its location, the maximisation of its loads and the rest breaks and work patterns of its driver. Mobile telephones also make lorry drivers much more accessible.

These applications and systems are now used by dynamic companies but are creating a certain degree of uneasiness, confusion and irritation amongst the drivers who raise a number of questions. How do they find out about what exactly is logged by the computer? Are these data also used to calculate wages? Can the mobile phone be turned off during rest breaks? Can it also be used for personal use? In addition, lorry drivers have to learn how to operate these on-board computers - not a simple task, which leads to extra stress.

Unions take hardline stance

In the current dispute, trade unions in the road haulage sector are playing the game hard from the start. They are also benefiting from the fact that for the moment lorry drivers are much in demand and hard to find. There are many job advertisements for drivers and companies are experiencing problems finding qualified personnel. Poor working conditions are certainly a factor in this situation. The demands voiced by the unions are not new and have been on the table for several years.

Unions want to get rid of the double standard operating in the sector: the official wage is BEF 322 an hour but unofficially more is possible and currently being offered. The unions claim that a lobby of employers is currently operating with practices that are in a "grey zone" of acceptability and they seem to be dominating the sector. That is why they resorted to road blockades at a number of strategic intersections. Employees at the Antwerp Opel plant were technically unemployed for two days due to the blockades and just-in-time management schemes experienced problems.

In the meantime a negotiator has been appointed to smooth relationships in the sector, which is known for its tense labour relations.

Commentary

This case demonstrates that a number of economic sectors that are working under conditions of extreme competition, low profit margins and poor working conditions are prone to experience difficult industrial relations as a result of changing and increasingly difficult market conditions. The deregulation of the European market is taking its toll across the road haulage sector and the consequences of these developments may well yet be felt in other European countries. (Peter Van der Hallen and Hans Bruyninckx, WAV)

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